

News from Ed Markey

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STATEMENT OF EDWARD J. MARKEY (D-MA) ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE DIRTY BOMB PREVENTION ACT

WASHINGTON, D.C. --

I am very pleased to be here with the Senator from New York to introduce legislation to reduce the threat of "dirty bombs" and radiological sabotage.

We have known for some time, even before the arrest of Jose Padilla, that Al Qaeda was trying to build dirty bombs or homemade nuclear weapons. We must now focus on the threat that there are other Al Qaeda operatives out there who are trying to use U.S. or foreign nuclear materials as weapons against America, and ensure that they do not succeed. The threat posed by these materials is very real:

- In 1987, scavengers in Brazil opened an abandoned canister containing 1400 Curies of powdered cesium and circulated its contents among the community, which resulted in 244 people contaminated, 54 people hospitalized, 19 people with radiation-induced skin burns, and 4 people DEAD. Just last week, reports indicated that large boxes of cesium, each of which contained 3500 Curies of radioactivity, have gone missing in the former Soviet Union. Imagine if a terrorist were to sprinkle cesium powder all over a shopping mall, stadium, or other populated area.

- Just 2 years ago, 2 people died and 5 became seriously ill when an Egyptian farmer stumbled upon a 2.4 INCH piece of radioactive cobalt that he found and stored at his home. Imagine if a terrorist obtained this material, and just hid it under a seat on the Washington metro.

- NRC Chairman Meserve stated that a dirty bomb containing a mere 1 Curie of radioactive materials could "spread low-level contamination over an area of several city blocks, possibly resulting in restriction of the area until the area was surveyed and decontaminated." The Federation of American Scientists modeled the detonation of a foot-long rod of cobalt obtained from a food irradiation plant, and found that it would result in the contamination of 1000 square kilometers, with a 10% risk of death from cancer for residents living inside a 300 city block area for 40 years following the detonation. But stealing the cobalt is not the only way to create a dirty bomb. Large food and medical sterilization facilities containing millions of Curies of cobalt could become dirty bombs if a large truck bomb was detonated nearby, or if conventional explosives were hidden in a shipment to one of these facilities.

- There are more than 2 MILLION radioactive sources in the U.S., used for medical procedures, research, and industrial processes. In the past 5 years, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission reported that nearly 1500 radioactive sources have been reported lost or stolen in the U.S., but less than half of them have been found. The NRC has admitted that it stopped tracking radioactive sources by serial number in 1984. Fedex and Lands End seem to do a better job at tracking clothing purchases than the NRC does at tracking radioactive materials.

- Moreover, U.S. Customs does not screen every package entering the U.S. from abroad to ensure that it is not leaking radiation. Radiation detectors are not located all ports of entry to the U.S., in vehicles used to deliver packages, or in facilities used to store packages for shipment to or within the U.S.

The danger is clear: The materials are located in thousands of locations across this country and abroad, and we are not ready. Today, we aren't ready to detect the radiation in a package being shipped here from abroad. We aren't ready to detect radiation in the subways, highways, malls, and stadiums of America. We can't even figure out which sources are lost because they aren't tracked using serial numbers.

The Dirty Bomb Prevention Act would require that these glaring security holes be fixed. It requires the NRC to set up a task force that also includes the defense community, the intelligence community, the homeland security officer and FEMA. The task force is to assess and recommend regulatory changes, which the NRC must then implement, to:

- Ensure there are systems for the secure tracking, recovery and storage of radioactive materials
- Ensure there are audits, inspections, and penalties for those who mishandle radioactive sources
- Increase physical security for facilities that store these materials and require security background checks for personnel with access to them
- Establish a system that would require anyone buying or leasing a radioactive source to pay a refundable deposit that they would get back when they returned the source safely
- Evaluate U.S. export controls on these materials to ensure that they do not fall into the wrong hands overseas and
- Assess whether there are some uses of radioactive materials that could be easily accomplished using other, less dangerous materials.

The National Academy of Sciences just this week released a report that addressed these security problems, and it too called for tightened regulations, a tracking system, and substitution of non-radioactive technologies where feasible.

As Governor Tom Ridge said yesterday in the House Energy and Commerce Committee, "Homeland Security is Hometown Security." I agree, and that is why we must make sure that these sources, which are located in large quantities in many hometowns all across this country, are secured.

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